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1. A method of distributing movies to customer households comprising the steps of:

under authority of content providers who control the distribution rights to movies, delivering digital movie disks to widely geographically dispersed distribution agents;

having distribution agents produce copies of the movie disks, each copy including an identification code that identifies the distribution agent who made the copy;

distributing the movie disk copies from the distribution agents to customer households that have playback devices compatible with the disks;

permitting the customer households to view desired movies through their playback devices;

communicating from the customer households movie playback information that identifies each movie that has been viewed and a distribution agent who is responsible for the movie being distributed to the customer household; and

as dictated by the movie playback information, compensating content providers and responsible distribution agents.

2. A method of distributing recorded digital data to consumers, comprising:

under authority of content providers, delivering digital data recorded in a tangible medium to a group of distribution agents;

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each distribution agent distributing an associated set of copies of the recorded data to a group of consumers;

identifying each distribution agent as such in the set of copies distributed by the distribution agent;

the consumers, using playback devices to play the distributed copies of the recorded data;

for copies of the recorded data that are played, transmitting to a system operator, information identifying the recorded data and the distribution agents for the copies; and

compensating the content providers and the distribution agents on the basis of the information transmitted to the system operator.

3. A method according to Claim 2, wherein the distributing step includes the step of, each distribution agent making copies of the recorded digital data delivered to the distribution agent.

4. A method according to Claim 2, wherein the transmitting step includes the step of the playback devices transmitting to the system operator, the information identifying the recorded data and the distribution agents for the copies.

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5. A method according to Claim 2, wherein the transmitting step includes the step of transmitting said information to the system operator at defined times.

6. A method according to Claim 2, wherein the transmitting step includes the step of transmitting information to the system operator indicating each time one of the copies is played.

7. A method according to Claim 2, further comprising the step of charging the consumers based on the information transmitted to the system operator.

8. A method according to Claim 2, further comprising the step of charging each consumer a fee for each time the consumer plays one of the copies of the recorded data.

9. A method according to Claim 8, wherein the charging step includes the step of charging a variable fee depending on when said one of the copies is played.

10. A method according to Claim 2, wherein:

at least some of the distribution agents are retail stores; and

the distributing step includes the step of at least some of the consumers obtaining identified copies of the recorded data at retail stores, and subsequently returning said identified copies to the retail stores.

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11. A method according to Claim 2, wherein the distributing step includes the step of distributing said copies to the consumers at no charge.

12. A method according to Claim 2, wherein the compensating step includes the step of compensating each distribution agent for each time one of the copies distributed by the agent is played.

13. A method according to Claim 2, wherein the delivering step includes the step of charging the distribution agents for the recordings delivered to the distribution agents.

14. A method according to Claim 2, further comprising the step of providing an identified group of playback devices with a specified processing means to enable the identified group of playback devices to play the distributed copies of the recorded data and thereby to inhibit playback devices, other than said identified group of playback devices, from playing the distributed copies of the recorded data.

15. A method according to Claim 14, wherein:

the recorded data includes a multitude of data frames having a specified security code; and

the specified processing means only outputs data frames having said specified security code.

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16. A method according to Claim 2, wherein the digital data recorded in a tangible medium is a digital movie disk.

17. A method according to Claim 2, wherein the tangible medium is an optical disc.

18. A method according to Claim 2, wherein at least some of the consumers possess a multitude of copies of recorded digital data, and further comprising the step of providing each of said some of the consumers with guides identifying the copies possessed by the consumer.

19. A method according to Claim 18, wherein the providing step includes the step of transmitting data to said guides to update information in the guides.

20. A method according to Claim 18, wherein the providing step includes the step of, for each of updating the guides with commercials based on consumers viewing of the played copies of the recorded data.

21. A system for distributing recorded digital data, comprising:

a multitude of sets of copies of a digital data recording, the recording having content authorized by a content provider, and wherein the copies in each set include data identifying an associated distribution agent;

means for distributing the copies of the recording to consumers;

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a multitude of playback devices, wherein each of the consumers has one of the playback devices for playing the copies of the recording, and each playback device includes means to identify the contents of, and the distribution agents associated with, the copies of the recording; and

means for transmitting from the playback devices to a system operator information identifying the contents of, and the distribution agents associated with, the copies of the recording played by the playback devices.

22. A system according to Claim 21, further comprising means, located at the system operator, for receiving said information from the playback devices, and for using said information to determine compensation for the content provider and the distribution agents.

23. A system according to Claim 21, wherein said information is transmitted from the playback devices to the system operator at defined times.

24. A system according to Claim 21, wherein when each playback device plays one of the copies, information identifying the content of, and the distribution agent associated with, said one of the copies is transmitted from the playback device to the system operator.

25. A system according to Claim 21, wherein the means for distributing the copies of the recording include a plurality of retail stores.

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26. A system according to Claim 21, wherein each distribution agent is compensated for each time one of the copies associated with the distribution agent is played by one of the playback devices.

27. A system according to Claim 21, wherein each of the playback devices includes a specified circuit that enables the playback device to play the distributed copies of the recording.

28. A system according to Claim 21, wherein the copies of the recording are optical disks.

29. A system according to Claim 21, wherein said content is a movie in the form of digital data.

30. A system according to Claim 21, wherein the recorded data includes a multitude of data frames having a specified security code, and the playback devices include a specified circuit to prevent the playback devices from outputting data frames not having said specified security code.

31. A system for playing, and for monitoring the playing of, digital recordings having given content authorized by a content provider, each of the recordings including data identifying an associated distribution agent, the system comprising:

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a multitude of playback devices for playing the recordings, each playback device including means for identifying the distribution agents associated with the recordings; and

a system controller for receiving from the playback devices information identifying the distribution agents associated with the recordings played by the playback devices.

32. A system according to Claim 32, wherein the system controller includes means for using said information received from the playback devices to determine compensation for the distribution agents.

33. A system according to Claim 31, wherein:

the playback devices further include means for identifying the content of the recordings played by the playback devices; and

the system controller includes means for receiving from the playback devices information identifying the content of the recordings played by the playback devices.

34. A system according to Claim 33, wherein the system controller includes means for using the information received from the playback devices to determine compensation for the distribution agents and the content provider.



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35. A system according to Claim 31, wherein each distribution agent is compensated for each time one of the recordings associated with the distribution agent is played by one of the playback devices.

36. A system according to Claim 31, wherein each of the playback devices includes a specified circuit that enables the playback device to play the recordings.

37. A system according to Claim 31, wherein the recordings are optical disks.

38. A system according to Claim 31, further comprising a multitude of program storage devices readable by the playback devices and tangibly embodying programs of instructions executable by the playback devices to display guides showing recordings available for play on the playback devices.

39. A system according to Claim 31, wherein the system controller transmits information to the playback devices to update said guides.

40. A system according to Claim 31, wherein each of the recordings include a multitude of data frames having a specified security feature, and the playback devices include circuits to control the playback devices so that the playback devices are able to output only data frames having the specified security feature.

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